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Current Expressions of American Jewish Identity: An Analysis of 114 Teenagers

Philip Schwadel
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, pschwadel2@unl.edu

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This chapter explores the characteristics of 114 American teenagers' Jewish identities using data from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR).[1] The NSYR includes a telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of 3,290 adolescents aged 13 to 17. Jewish teenagers were over-sampled, resulting in a total of 3,370 teenage participants. Of the NSYR teens surveyed, 141 have at least one Jewish parent and 114 of them identify as Jewish. The NSYR also includes in-depth face-to-face interviews with a total of 267 U.S. teens: 23 who have at least one Jewish parent and 18 who identify as Jewish. The following analysis draws upon quantitative data from the 114 teens who identified themselves as Jewish in the face-to-face interviews.

Expressions of Jewish Identity

The Jewish research participants expressed their Jewish identities predominantly through their Jewish communal participation or civic involvement. Relationships with other Jews are extremely important to the teens surveyed. They tend to value the concept of "the Jewish community." Based on their understanding of the importance of performing *mitvot* (good deeds) and facilitating *tikkun olam* (repair of the world), many Jewish teens articulated their Jewish and non-Jewish civic

involvement as an expression of their Jewish identities. Few Jewish teens, however, conveyed their Jewish identities in what are generally considered traditional forms of religious expression.

These findings were discerned by asking teens how important or unimportant religious faith is in shaping how they live their daily lives.[2] Only 16 percent of Jewish teens surveyed said religious faith is very or extremely important in shaping their daily lives, compared to 41 percent of the Catholic teens and 65 percent of Protestant teens (table 1). During an interview, one Jewish teen explained: "I don't even think about religion often." This was a common sentiment among those interviewed. Another Jewish teen said: "I don't feel really religious. . . . I'm only like a part-time believer type thing." Still another explained that

Table 1 Traditional religious beliefs and activities, ages 13–17 (percentages)

	Jewish	*Catholic*	*Protestant*	*All teens*
Faith is very/extremely important in shaping daily life	16	41	65	51
Faith is very/extremely important in shaping major life decisions	24	41	63	50
Definitely believe in God	70	85	93	85
Unsure about belief in God	27	14	6	12
God is a personal being involved in the lives of people today	37	66	77	68
God is not personal, but something like a cosmic life force	36	15	9	15
Definitely believe in the possibility of divine miracles from God	25	55	74	61
Pray alone a few times a week or more	11	49	63	53
Read the scriptures alone once a week or more	8	13	35	26
Attend religious services at least once a month	33	58	65	60
Okay to pick and choose religious beliefs	76	55	40	47
Okay to practice other religions	76	59	43	53
N	114	819	1,792	3,370

Source: National Study of Youth and Religion 2002–2003.

being Jewish is "important in the fact I meet friends and like I meet people I can talk to but I don't think it's like very important in the fact that I'm like always praying all the time." Other Jewish teens expressed a disbelief in religion in general, such as a thirteen-year-old boy who said that religion is "not important . . . because it's all made up." Compared to the Christian teens surveyed, Jewish teens are less likely to hold conventional religious beliefs or to participate in congregations. Some Jewish teens even articulated antipathy toward religion.

Regardless of their geographic location, their Jewish education, or their parents' denominational affiliation, most Jewish teenagers surveyed are not particularly interested in what they consider the religious aspects of Judaism. Most said that religious faith is neither a daily source of inspiration nor a vital aspect of their decision-making about major life issues. Only 24 percent of the Jewish research participants said religious faith is very or extremely important in shaping their major life decisions, compared to 41 percent of Catholic teens and 63 percent of Protestant teens (table 1). As one Jewish teen put it: "I say I'm Jewish, but it's not like I live every day like I'm Jewish."

The Jewish teens surveyed expressed a strong sense of religious individualism. More than three-quarters of the Jewish teenagers said it is okay to pick and choose religious beliefs. The same number would approve of practicing religions other than Judaism (table 1). One Jewish boy said that "no one" influenced his ideas about religion. He explained that he is solely responsible for his religious beliefs and his relationship with the supernatural. A sixteen-year-old Jewish girl believes that it is okay to pick and choose religious beliefs "because like if you don't agree with something then you shouldn't have to follow it." In contrast, far fewer Christian teens expressed such internally driven authority: 55 percent of Catholics and 40 percent of Protestants say it is okay to pick and choose religious beliefs, and 59 percent of Catholics and 43 percent of Protestants say it is okay to practice other religions.

The Jewish teens surveyed were considerably less likely than the Christian teens to regularly attend religious services. One-third of Jewish teens attend synagogue at least once a month, whereas 58 percent of Catholic teens and almost two-thirds of Protestant teens report monthly church attendance (table 1).[3] Jewish teens reported that their synagogue attendance declined further after their bar or bat mitzvah ceremony. Twenty percent of the sixteen- and seventeen-year-old Jewish teens surveyed said they never attend religious services, while only 6

percent of thirteen-, fourteen- and fifteen-year-old Jewish teens never attend. One Jewish teen justified his lack of synagogue attendance in this way: "I mean I think I could communicate with God without having to go [to synagogue] every Saturday and doing specific prayers. Like I feel like I have a connection without being organized in this group."

While Jewish teens are not very likely to adhere to traditional religious beliefs or to participate in synagogue, they strongly value their Jewish identities. Jewish teens are New Yorkers, Californians, Texans, and proud residents of every other state. They are jocks, nerds, geeks, freaks, and popular kids. They are also Jewish, and most consider their Jewish identities to be central to their perception of themselves.

Centrality of Jewish Community

Many of the Jewish teens surveyed participate in Jewish programs and events. For most of these Jewish teens, their involvement is focused on in-group social networks. The majority of Jewish teens surveyed are active in organized Jewish activities: 55 percent of Jewish teens say they have taken classes in the last two years to study Hebrew, Jewish history and traditions, or modern Jewish life. Approximately one-third are currently involved in Jewish youth groups (table 2). About one-half of the Jewish teens have also been campers at Jewish summer camps (table 2). Many Jewish teens who are not interested in religiosity have vibrant informal and formal Jewish affiliations. This attitude is exemplified by a Jewish teen who feels that religion is "not very important." Despite that opinion, she had a bat mitzvah, is highly active in a Jewish youth group, and said being Jewish is important to her.

For the Jewish teens surveyed, religious observance is not the focus of their Jewish involvement. A girl who is highly active in a Jewish summer camp explained that her camp is "a secular camp and it's a lot of culture, a lot of Jewish culture, so I feel . . . like more part of the culture and not of the religion." Participation in formal and informal Jewish education is more common among teens than attendance at worship services. Jewish teens closely resemble non-Jewish teens in their patterns of enrollment at Sunday school, youth-group participation and summer-camp attendance, yet the meaning they give to those experiences may differ.

Most of the Jewish teens in the sample had Jewish educational experiences that included a bar or bat mitzvah. Barry Kosmin notes that the bar or bat mitzvah "is one of the most significant ways parents can publicly affirm their identity as Jews at this life stage."[4] Eighty-one percent of the Jewish teenagers publicly affirmed their Jewish identities in that way (table 2) and, since some of the teens are only thirteen-year-olds, it is likely that more than 81 percent will eventually have a bar or bat

Table 2 Religious activities revisited, ages 13–17 (percentages)

	Jewish	*Catholic*	*Protestant*	*All teens*
Had a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah	81	—	—	—
Regularly practice Jewish traditions observing the Sabbath	48	—	—	—
Taken classes in last two years to study Hebrew, Jewish history, traditions, or modern Jewish life	55	—	—	—
Attended a religious Sunday school a few times a month or more in last year	39	38	61	47
Currently involved in any religious youth group	34	24	52	38
Ever been a camper at a summer camp run by a religious organization	48	24	50	39
Celebrated Chanukah in last year	100	—	—	—
Celebrated Passover in last year	98	—	—	—
Celebrated Rosh Hashanah in last year	89	—	—	—
Celebrated Yom Kippur in last year	91	—	—	—
Celebrated Simkhat Torah in last year	42	—	—	—
Celebrated Sukkot in last year	54	—	—	—
Organized volunteer work or community service occasionally or more often in last year	52	34	31	33
Involved in any political activities in last two years	30	8	12	11
N	114	819	1,792	3,370

Source: National Study of Youth and Religion 2002–2003.

mitzvah. A bar- or bat-mitzvah ceremony was very meaningful for some teens in the sample. A girl recalled, "I loved my bat mitzvah. . . . I had to work really hard and did my whole Torah portion and I did some Haftorah. . . . I loved the service, even though I was really nervous." For other Jewish teens, the significance of the event centered on family and community, rather than on the performance of religious tradition. The focus on family was a motivating factor for one girl who speculated: "If I didn't do it I don't think I would have been devastated but I guess maybe it was important for my family." Whatever the focus of the ceremony, most Jewish teens in the sample participated in this rite of passage; even the thirteen-year-old boy who believes that religion is "all made up" had recently had a bar mitzvah.

One-half of Jewish teens in the sample said that they observed Shabbat (the Sabbath) (table 2). Most observe Shabbat at home, rather than through synagogue attendance. As with their bar- and bat-mitzvah ceremonies, the focus of Shabbat for most of the teens is on family rather than religious observance. One teen explained that he does not attend synagogue more than a few times a year and does not consider himself to be a religious person, but on many Friday nights his family has a Shabbat dinner and his father "tries to get like Jewish philosophical discussions going."

The Jewish holidays are also significant events for the Jewish teens in the sample. Almost all celebrate Chanukah and Passover, and the vast majority of them also celebrate the High Holy Days—Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah (table 2).[5] About half of the teens surveyed celebrate Simchat Torah and Sukkot (table 2). For many Jewish teens surveyed, the celebration of holidays marks their only Jewish engagement after their bar- or bat-mitzvah ceremony. Many of these holidays are traditionally centered at home. Consequently, some teens who never attend synagogue still observe the Jewish holidays.

Most of the Jewish teens see Jewish holidays as significant family gatherings rather than expressions of religious observance. One teen explained: "For Chanukah or Passover we light candles . . . or we have a seder or dinner . . . and probably get together with family." This teen, like many others, did not mention the religious significance of the holiday. Instead, she focused on the importance of being with her family. Many other Jewish teens expressed the importance of celebrating the holidays with family and friends—even those who feel little con-

nection to religiosity. One girl talked about how Jewish holidays help bring her family together. She said,

> Religious holidays [are] always a time to see . . . extended family. So it's always nice. So like for Passover, we would go to our cousins' house and that's like a time to see everybody. So it's always nice, it's like having Thanksgiving all the time.

Many of the Jewish teenagers spoke of the holidays as secular, celebratory events, akin to Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July.

The significance of Jewish family and friends is also evident in Jewish teenagers' discussions of their future family plans. Many Jewish teens in the sample expect to marry other Jews and to raise their children Jewish. Even those teens who do not consider themselves religious spoke about the importance of the Jewish family and of having Jewish friends. One teen explained that she is generally more comfortable around Jews. She said, "I feel like the Jewish ones are more understanding." While she does not consider herself to be a religious person, she talked about her desire to marry a Jew.

A number of Jewish girls reported that their mothers advised them to marry a Jew because it would be "easier." One indicated that her mother would prefer that she marry "a nonreligious non-Jew [rather] than a really religious Jew." This specificity demonstrates how the importance of shared ethnic ties, rather than religious beliefs, were the focus of that mother's advice. Some Jewish boys also spoke about the importance of the Jewish family. One boy hoped to raise his children as Jews, but felt that if they "didn't believe in it by the time they were you know in their teens it wouldn't necessarily bother me." The desire to marry Jews and raise Jewish children emerged as a significant expression of Jewish identity among the teens surveyed.

Jewish teens repeatedly mentioned the centrality of Jewish friends, family, and the Jewish community in the articulation of their Jewish identities. When asked about the importance of being part of the Jewish religion, a sixteen-year-old Jewish girl from Queens explained the centrality of community with these words: "I think it's important because . . . it makes you closer . . . to people and it makes you bigger, but then again it doesn't necessarily have to do with religion." This teen explained that her closest friends (whom she considers "brothers and sisters") were made through her involvement in a Jewish youth group. When she was younger, her family attended synagogue to celebrate the

High Holy Days. At the time of the interview, she said that she rarely attends religious services, even on the major holidays. She explained: "I'm Jewish, but again I'm not religious at all." As with many of the teens surveyed, relationships with other Jews make up the primary expression of her Jewish identity. The majority of teens interviewed consider being Jewish "important," but claim that "it doesn't necessarily have to do with religion."

Civic Activity and Helping Others

In addition to the significance of relationships with other Jews, the Jewish teenagers surveyed emphasized the importance of helping others as part of their understanding of what it means to be Jewish. They are highly active in civic organizations and many consider their voluntary activity and community service to be an expression of their Jewish identities. The NSYR survey shows that Jewish teenagers are particularly likely to participate in civic activities. More than one-half of Jewish teens said they did organized volunteer work or community service in the previous year (table 2). Conversely, only about one-third of Christian teens reported volunteering or doing community service. Jewish teens are also politically motivated, with 30 percent of Jewish teens having been involved in political activities (not including student government) in the previous two years, compared to 8 percent of Catholic teens and 12 percent of Protestant teens (table 2).

When asked directly, many Jewish teens said their voluntary activities have little to do with their Jewish identities. Instead, they claimed that their sense of responsibility to help others was based on their socioeconomic status.[6] This reflects the fact that most of the Jewish teens surveyed had middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds.[7] A more complex dynamic emerged when the teens were asked how they became involved in their voluntary activities and with whom they volunteer—Jewish organizations played a large role. For example, one Jewish girl explained that she volunteers because she is "a lot more fortunate . . . than like the lower class." She clarified that she does not volunteer out of a sense of religious obligation. Nevertheless, her primary form of community service is to volunteer in her synagogue's gift shop. Another girl, who rarely attends synagogue and does not consider herself a religious person, has been an active member of a Jewish youth group for five years. As a member of the group, she has attended anti-

war protests and performed volunteer work. Additionally, she plans to volunteer as a counselor for the youth group. Yet she too explained that her volunteerism is not performed out of a sense of religious obligation.

Other Jewish teens were more direct about the connection between volunteerism and their Jewish identities. For some, helping others clearly takes on religious significance. Rather than praying or attending synagogue, they focus on performing *mitvot* (acts of loving-kindness) and *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) as an outlet for their religious beliefs and values. One girl asserted that people have an obligation to volunteer. "I guess it's what I've been taught. . . . Volunteering and helping people," she explained, is "one of the main aspects" of Judaism. She spoke about "acts of loving-kindness" and described helping others as "one of the pillars" of Judaism (a fact that impresses her about the Jewish religion). Another Jewish teen said that being Jewish explicitly motivates her voluntary activity. She described the many "talks in Hebrew school about helping others out, doing good deeds." Another Jewish teen explained that her voluntary activities revolve around her synagogue's work in a soup kitchen. She was required, as part of her bat mitzvah training, to do community service. Other Jewish teens also mentioned working to help the poor or homeless through their synagogues. One girl, for example, cooked for the homeless in a synagogue-organized activity. She said, "I did it because for school they wanted you to do a mitzvah project and it just seemed like . . . a good thing to do for a mitzvah project." For many Jewish teens, voluntary activity and community service are important expressions of their Jewish identities.

Many Jewish teens in the sample equated being "a good Jew" with "being a good person." One teen explained, "There's a large Jewish belief about doing mitzvahs or doing good . . . just being like that, being helpful, being nice all the time . . . you know, a good person." Many other Jewish teens echoed these sentiments, such as a teen who explained that "for me Judaism is more of like how you live your life, like how you be a moral person." Jewish teens repeatedly focused on being a good person and helping others as primary aspects of their Jewish identities.

Conclusion

Only a small minority of Jewish teens in the NSYR sample regularly performs religious rituals or attends worship services. Most say religion

has little effect on their daily lives. A substantial number of the Jewish teens surveyed are unsure about the existence of God. Some were indifferent or even antagonistic toward religion in general.

Most take a pluralistic and individualistic approach to their religious beliefs and practices. They approve of exploring and practicing other religious traditions and feel entitled to adapt Jewish traditions to suit their needs. Some Jewish teens foresee greater religiosity in their futures. A sixteen-year-old boy who stopped attending synagogue shortly after his bar mitzvah speculated, "I'll probably end up doing [religious activities] again as I get older, just 'cause that just seems the way things work in life." At the time of the survey, most Jewish teens in the sample did not feel obligated by Jewish doctrine.

Instead, the majority of Jewish teenagers in the survey expressed their Jewish identities through formal and informal communal membership. Many Jewish teenagers said that it is essential to have Jewish friends. They expressed the intention to raise their children as Jews. Many of them, especially the girls, hope to marry a Jew. Large numbers belong to Jewish community groups, attend Jewish summer camps, and participate in Jewish youth groups. Jewish holidays are celebrated with a focus on familial connection. Jewish teens expressed a strong connection to the Jewish community.

Jewish teenagers participate in many voluntary and community-service activities, which they often regard as an expression of their Jewish identities. They speak about the importance of helping others and many equate those actions with being "a good Jew." The concept of a mitzvah, or a good deed done out of religious duty, is central to Jewish teenagers' consciousnesses.

Jewish identity is ever changing: Expressions of Jewish identity wax and wane throughout an individual's life. Teens' observance of Shabbat, participation in Jewish organizations, and celebration of Jewish holidays, etc., will be transformed as they grow older. Whether observance of religious rituals will play a greater or lesser role in Jewish teens' futures remains to be seen.

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1. For more information on the NSYR data, see Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, "Methodological Design and Procedures for the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR)" (Chapel Hill, NC: National Study of Youth and Religion, 2003), http://www.youthandreligion.org.

2. Every teen in the full sample was asked the same series of questions. While this was beneficial for the purposes of comparison across religious traditions, it may have also obscured the data among non-Christian respondents. For example, asking Jewish or Muslim teens a question using Christian-centric nomenclature (such as "religious faith") might elicit a different response than would a question using in-group language.

3. Note that 40 percent of Jewish teens reported attending religious services at least once a month. Yet for only 33 percent of those who attend Jewish services at least once a month, a synagogue is their primary or secondary place of worship.

4. Barry A. Kosmin, "Coming of Age in the Conservative Synagogue: The Bar/Bat-Mitzvah Class of 5755," in *Jews in the Center: Conservative Synagogues and their Members*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

5. Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and the days between these two holidays are considered the High Holy Days or High Holidays. The ten days from the beginning of Rosh Hashanah to the end of Yom Kippur are also called the Days of Awe.

6. The extent of an individual's civic activity and voluntary service is frequently correlated with socioeconomic status. See Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

7. Of the teens surveyed by NSYR, 23 percent live in households with incomes under $30,000, while only 6 percent of the Jewish teen respondents live in households with incomes below $30,000.